"Nae man can tether time or tide"
—Robert Burns

As Burns so simply put it, time
cannot be tethered, but you
can put time on a nice chain
or a decent strap and wear
something appropriate and
authentic to the next military event you
attend. So often at reenactments, the
simplest of anachronisms can spoil the
whole karma of slipping back in time
through the portals living history events
offer. How many times have you looked
down the ranks and seen some poor guy
still wearing a quartz watch and Perry
Ellis eye glasses? Well if you are doing a
Desert Storm event that might be OK,
but at the Second Battle of Manassas it
can, shall we say... ruin the moment. (Be
warned you farbs out there, proper eye
wear will be addressed in a future issue
of Military Classics Illustrated.)

It has been reported that during one
scene in the movie Dances With Wolves,
one Indian raises his arm to deliver a
fatal skull-crushing blow to an adversary
and you can see what appears to be a
Rolex Presidential gold watch strapped
to his wrist. Such faux-pas are inexcus-
able in a feature film but commonplace
on the battlefields of today's weekend
warriors.

This issues column will attempt to
give you a few tips and some interesting
information on selecting an appropriate
time piece for your impression.

EARLY PERIODS

The first clocks made their appear-
ance in the early to mid-1200s. Much
like the room-filling computers of the
1940s & 50s, they were huge and cumber-
some, and available only to the rich-
est: of the aristocracy. Personal time-
pieces came into vogue in the mid-
1500s and continued to be the accouter-
ments of the wealthy until some 300
years later in the 1850s.

The industrial revolution of the mid-
1800s was the catalyst for many
changes in society. As goods for the
consumer were manufactured on machin-
ery capable of producing interchange-
able parts, the price of those goods
dropped, making the trappings of the
elite available to the common man.
Such was the way of watches and
firearms in the ante-bellum period.

The earliest of mass-produced pocket watches were wound by a separate key. This
would be the proper timepiece for a Civil War impression, as stem winds did not really
appear until after the conflict.
THE CIVIL WAR YEARS

The American Watch Company was one of the first to offer a dependable pocket watch for the masses beginning in 1853. The Roxbury, Massachusetts company sold nearly 200,000 watches through the Civil War years (1861-1865) at a cost of $40 each—or $13 for just the movement—the watch was still an impressive investment. Colt revolvers sold during the same time for half as much. Needless to say, the average corn-fed infantryman of either army went into battle without a personal time piece.

If you feel that your Civil War impression calls for a pocket watch, try to keep a few things in mind when you search for an authentic tick-tock. The coin silver watch case, the most popular of the time, came in one of two styles, a hunter case or open face. The hunter case was a silver case that had a full cover on both the front and back. A downward push on the stem, popped the case front open to reveal the dial. This style was generally more expensive and provided protection to the fragile crystals of the period. The open face watch was the most common and the crystals were generally thicker to withstand the punishment an exposed watch face could expect. Usually mounted in a coin or nickel silver case, the open face watch is the one most often encountered at antique shops and flea markets. An average price is in the $90-$225 range for a decent key wind, open face, German silver watch at today's prices.

Once you have procured a proper key wind watch for you impression, you need a chain to hang it from. Most antique stores offer an assortment of gold filled chains with a bar guard for slipping through your vest button hole. (See the George S. Cook photo of J.E.B. Stuart for an example.) Other fasteners included

**Watch chains varied from simple to fairly complex. The most common was the single chain with simple bar guard (left). The guard could be worn inside or outside the buttonhole. The “Albert” (named after Queen Victoria’s consort) was a single chain with an added chain for the display of a fob (right) and the double Albert (above) featured two chains. Usually a fob would be suspended from the center, and another keepsake, such as a knife or medallion, worn on the end of the chain not securing the watch.**

This British military issue pocket watch of World War I/II vintage, sports a simple leather keeper that could be attached to the wearer's tunic buttonhole and then be secured inside a breast pocket.
Living History

brazed hair chains, usually a homemade gift from a loved one, or gold chains with a closed eye-loop clasp that was fastened through a button hole as well. A Gardner photo of Abraham Lincoln clearly illustrates this chain. Lincoln wore a William Ellery model of the Waltham watch.

The American Watch Co.—also known as the Waltham Watch Co.—produced key wound watches from 1853-1919. Their first stem wind watch was produced in 1868. A proper Civil War period watch should be of a key wind movement. Waltham, the work horse of the watch industry, manufactured watches until 1957. Their last serial number was in the 35 million range. The Elgin Watch Company—also known as the National Watch Co.—corporate papers show their founding in 1864, however it was 1867 before their first watch was made. They made their first stem wind watch in 1871. Elgin produced watches until 1964, having made over 55 million watches. Another watch-making giant of the 1800s was the Illinois Watch Co. of Springfield, Illinois. Their first stem wind was made in 1875.

THE INTERIM PERIOD 1866-1914

This American Signal Corpsman of World War I sports a wristwatch with the then-fashionable “shrapnel guard.” Pete Tuttle collection

Many early wristwatches were fashioned out of earlier pocket watches, like this gold hunter case.

The stem wind pocket watch was the country’s favorite timepiece throughout the balance of the 19th century. There were a few changes, not only in the design and development of watches, but changes in the way we tell time that evolved during this period as well. A visit to the time table exhibit at the B&O Railroad Museum of Baltimore, Maryland will open your eyes to the huge mess that the country was in as far as time was concerned in the mid 1880s. Each and every town in America, kept its own time. There was no standard time in the U.S. until November 1883. Until that point, trains had to run schedules according to the accepted time in each town that bore a whistle stop. Towns that were only separated by a few miles could also be separated by many minutes as well. This caused great confusion in trying to keep trains on schedule, not only to those who were expecting arrivals and departures, but because many lines ran on only one track, schedules had to be maintained to prevent head on collisions, of which there were an ever-increasing number until the adoption of...
standard time and time zones in 1883.

By 1893, most railroads were requiring the conductors to use only regulated and inspected watches that were known to keep accurate time. The boom of the American Railroad watch began and continued as the mainstay of many watch companies until Hamilton sold the last Railroad watch in 1969. It was during this time period that Robert H. Ingersoll & Brothers introduced “The watch that made the dollar famous” with their $1 pocket watches that made timepieces available to everyone who desired to have one. Ingersoll produced nearly 100 million watches from 1892-1944.

TWENTIETH CENTURY TIMEPIECES

As the storm clouds of war rolled over Europe in 1914, the timepiece of choice was still the pocket watch. However companies such as Elgin and Hampden produced tiny movements in cases that were strapped to your wrist as early as 1910. (The Empress Josephine is reported to have sported an early wristwatch as early as 1806.) However the wristwatch found little favor on this side of the Atlantic until our Doughboys took to them in the trenches in 1917. The German Navy was a pioneer in the acceptance of wristwatches in the 1880s and not only wore them with pride, but also let out one of the first contracts for watches whose sole use would be for (literally) an arm of the military.

The early Great War wristwatches have many neat characteristics that make them distinctive. The first models were small gauge pocket watches that had a custom

During the Great War, civilian watches, such as this Elgin, could be fitted with special "shrapnel Guards" to protect their fragile crystals.
chance to look authentic while you search for a period watch while hiding a modern quartz time piece under the leather cover. Some watch makers to look for that produced wristwatches during the Great War period are Elgin, Hamilton, Hampden, Ingersoll and Waltham.

Daylight saving time, though an idea of Benjamin Franklin, was first implemented during the Great War, although England and Germany kept different standard time during the four year conflict. Not only did the daylight time economy provide factory workers in munitions and other war industries more time to work, but natural resources were conserved, all adding to the war effort. Due to the differences in German and English Standard Time, many battle reports will show discrepancies in the time of the day as the European time zone line ran through the middle of no-man’s-land.

Today it is second nature to look towards your wrist to gain an accurate accounting of the time, however during the first decade of the 20th century wristwatches where considered most un-manly. Edgar Guest wrote in his 1918 book of verse entitled Over There, how the wristwatch was considered; “soft and flabby”, “a parlor dude-a-prancing”, “a puny pacific” and a host of other derogatory terms meant to elicit chuckles and laughs from those who would encounter such a lop in public. However as naval officers, and then artillerymen, saw the advantages of having handy access to reliable time, the attitudes of the average soldier changed to the point where the wristwatch man, as Guest wrote: “He’s the finest of the finest, he’s the bravest of the clan. And I pray for God’s protection for our wristwatch man.”

During World War II and Vietnam, many thousands of watches were actually purchased by the various services. Still, it was very common to see a soldier wearing his old pre-war civilian time-piece. As long as the period is correct, either would be proper for use with either of those impressions.

Hamilton continues to make U.S. military watches and made hundreds of thousands during the Vietnam period. The familiar green and black faced watch with the web strap was a favorite for the military in the late 20th century. Today’s internet shopping pages are full of British RAF, Czech Army and Russian military watches. Buy a good reference book on the watches you desire for your impression and enjoy hitting the yard sales and flea markets for your deal of the century. A bad watch can spoil a good impression. Of all the unauthentic items we mistakenly use, a watch is one of the easiest to get right.


I AM THE WRISTWATCH

Before the war I was born by women. Bejeweled and fragile, I hung about their dainty wrists, looked at more for the gems than adorned me than for the time I kept.

I was also born by lounge-lizards, the boys who had their handkerchiefs tucked up their sleeves, who would soon be seen without their highly-polished canes as without their trousers, the little lads tried to sport monocles and endeavor in vain to grow moustaches and to cultivate unAmerican accents.

I was the mark of the woman and the sharp. I was ridiculed by stage comedians, by cartoonists of the press, by haberdashers and men’s outfitters of all sorts. To buy me was to buy a social ostracism at the hands of ones fellow creatures. To wear me in public, in the allegedly more rugged portions of the Middle West was to invite physical violence.

To flaunt me in the face of the Arizona cowboy—my whole works tremble to think of the consequences!

But now—behold me, revivified, re-glorified, part and parcel of the practical equipment for the most practical of wars! Tuned to the minute, I give the time for the marching millions from the base ports to the front.

From the General down to the newly arrived buck Private, they all wear me, they all swear by me instead of at me.

On the wrist of every line officer in the front line trenches, I point to the hour, minute and second at which the waiting men spring from the trenches to the attack.

I, the once-despised, am the final arbiter as to when the barrage shall cease, when it shall resume. I need not point with my tiny hands and the signal is given that means life or death to thousands upon thousands.

My phosphorous glow soothes and charms the chilled sentry, as he stands, waist deep in water amid the impenetrable blackness, and tells him how long he must watch there before his relief is due.

I mount guards, I dismiss guards.

Everything that is done in the army itself, that is done for the army behind the lines, must be done according to my dictates. True to the Greenwich Observatory, I work upon all men in khaki my rigid and imperious sway.

I go where I please without passes. Perched above the deft and delicate fingers of surgeons, I am present at all operations. On the hairy forearms of the husky artillerymen, I am there with every tug of the lanyard, and can feel the firm biceps tighten from below.

I am in all and of all, at the heart of every move in this man’s war. I am the chronicler of every second that the war ticks on its way. Lifted forever and forever above the noodle dog class of useless ornament, I am the instructor, the arbiter, the console, the friend of every officer and every man.

I am in this war, the indispensable, the always-to-be-reckoned-with.

I am the wristwatch.

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